



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

Eschatology: Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Judgment



Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337), Cappella Scrovegni a Padova, Ascension Public domain



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Pray together Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.



Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the *Breaking Open the Word* worksheet for this week.

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

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Sharing Human Experience

Catechist introduces the topic in these or similar words:

When the Church talks about end times, end of life, or life after death, it uses the word *eschatology*. As Catholics, we believe in life after death. Life after death constitutes three possibilities—three states of being—known as heaven, purgatory, and hell. This session will focus on the Church’s teaching regarding the afterlife, the Church’s eschatology, and what it believes about heaven, hell, purgatory, and judgment.

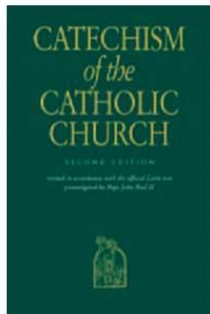
Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the larger group.

- ▶ What do you believe about the afterlife?
- ▶ If you believe in heaven and hell, what do you think it will be like?

Catechist invites participants to spend the next five to seven minutes responding to the following exercise. Participants share their responses with one other person then shares insights in the larger group.

- ▶ Have you ever given any thought to your own death?
- ▶ If you were asked to write your own obituary, how would you want it to read at the end of your life?

Catechist invites everyone to take a few minutes to write his or her own brief obituary, one small paragraph of three or four sentences. Invite people to share it with one other person, then invite some to share in the wider group.



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Catechist continues:

- ▶ *Eschatology* is a word the Church uses to refer to everything we believe about death, heaven, purgatory, hell, and judgment. Eschatology understands that the reign of God is now as well as not yet. Eschatology refers to the last things, the end of Jesus’ ministry, and the end of time and cosmic events.

- ▶ How you would like to read about your life at the end of your life is only a glimpse of the potential God has for each of us in our lives.
- ▶ How we die and the quality of life at death and after death depends on the way we live.
- ▶ We will briefly address heaven, hell, and purgatory because what is most important to the living of our lives now, here on earth, is our understanding of judgment.

Hell

Refer to articles 1033-1037.

- ▶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that hell is a state of eternal damnation for those who through conscious choice die in a state of mortal sinfulness. The suffering of hell constitutes everlasting separation from God who is our sure happiness and joy and who created in us a longing for him (#212, Compendium: CCC, USCCB).
- ▶ God has gifted us with the gift of freedom. If we believe in freedom, then hell is logical. We have the freedom to choose between good and evil. The consequence of willingly choosing evil with full freedom and conscience can only mean that we are cut off from God. All we know for sure is that there is a biblical tradition that suggests it exists. It is considered a state of torment and punishment where we are cut off from the love of God.

Biblical Context of Hell

Old Testament

- ▶ The Old Testament is unclear in its belief in an after-life for the dead. There are references to retribution for the just and the unjust, but there is no clear cut theology.
- ▶ There was an Old Testament understanding of an underworld known as Sheol, an existence in which there is no joy, sorrow, praise, or thanks given to God. There is no communication with God in the underworld. This place is not synonymous with the Christian understanding of hell however.
- ▶ Later Old Testament writers make a distinction between the fate of the just and the unjust. The just live with God while the unjust live in sorrow and pain (Wisdom 4:19).
- ▶ The concept of a punitive afterlife is recognized in the use of the word *Gehenna*—originally a place where human sacrifices had taken place. The word evolves as a reference to a place of unquenchable fire where the corpses of those who rebelled against God could be viewed by pilgrims to Jerusalem. Writings reflect a punitive after-life as a place where darkness, everlasting damnation, fire, chains, and other punishments abound.

New Testament

- ▶ The New Testament appropriates Gehenna in its reference to hell. Paul speaks of hell as a state in which people are cut off from God. The ultimate punishment of hell is to be cut off from eternal life offered by the sacrifice of Christ.
- ▶ The Church teaches that anyone who dies in a state of mortal sin will go to hell. Their punishment will be in proportion to the evil they committed on earth. Like heaven, hell is not a place; it is a state of being. The fire of hell is descriptive language used to describe what it means to be cut off forever from God's love. We do not know if anyone is in hell. God does not will anyone go to hell, nor does God predestine anyone to suffer it.
- ▶ If anyone is there, it is a willful, personal choice.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question first in dyads, then in the wider group.

- ▶ What are your feelings about hell?
- ▶ In your estimation, what would it take for you to end up in hell?
- ▶ How do you feel when people say that if you are not Christian you will end up in hell?

Catechist continues:

It is important for all Catholics to understand...

- ▶ The Church teaches that *all* salvation comes from Christ, the Head, through the Church which is his Body. Hence, they cannot be saved who, knowing the Church as founded by Christ and necessary for salvation, would refuse to enter her or remain in her.
- ▶ At the same time, thanks to Christ and to his Church, those who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ and his Church but sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, try to do his will as it is known through the dictates of conscience can attain eternal salvation" (Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church, USCCB, #171.)
- ▶ In one of the prayers of our Church, the "Act of Contrition," we pray that we "...dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell." The Church teaches that a healthy fear over the loss of heaven is a valid first motivation to experience God. It is ultimately an invitation to enter into relationship with the living God.
- ▶ We do not, however, have a relationship with God simply because we are afraid of the alternative. That fear for some is merely the first step toward taking their relationship with God seriously.

Purgatory

Refer to articles 1030-1032.

This one of the paintings from “Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry.” This depicts the purified souls in Purgatory. Public domain.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions. Catechist initiates the exercise by sharing a story from his or her own life. See appendix #1

- ▶ Have you ever had a period in your life where you waited for something, where you were going through a terribly difficult time, but on the other side of the situation you realized how much you matured or grew?



Catechist continues:

- ▶ The Church teaches that purgatory is a state of those who die and who are still in relationship and friendship with God, yet who still need to be purified before the gates of heaven are opened to them (#210 Compendium: CCC, USCCB).

Two perspectives of purgatory that have been handed down to us

- ▶ Western Perspective (see appendix #3). The western tradition understood it as a punitive state of being that assumes those who endure purgatory are not considered good enough to go directly to God. Such persons are punished by being cut off from God's love until taken home to be with God for the last time. The West used metaphors that were punitive to describe purgatory whereas the Eastern Church preferred language that speaks of maturation and growth.
- ▶ Eastern Perspective. The Eastern Church understood purgatory as a state of purification and maturation. It is a state of being in which one grows in the love and relationship with God. It is about the incredible love and mercy of God.
- ▶ Purgatory is not considered in the negative sense; it is not a negative resting place since all those in purgatory are certain that they will ultimately share the beatific vision and enter heaven. Our tradition teaches that those in purgatory can be helped by the prayers, the works of mercy, and the Eucharist offered by those still living. The bottom line of purgatory is that it is about maturing in our relationship with God, not about paying a debt for sins.
- ▶ Ultimately, purgatory expresses the understanding that those who are basically good and just people at the time of death, but who are still in need of purification must undergo some type of cleansing after death. Such persons can be helped through the prayers and acts of charity by the loved ones who remain.

- ▶ There is no specific scriptural evidence of purgatory. However, there are hints. 2 Macc 12:38-46 speaks of praying for those who have died in battle and would seem to support the doctrine. Support may also be found indirectly in Mt 5:26, Mt. 12:32 and 1 Cor. 3:11-15.
- ▶ Any understanding of purgatory that is superstitious in nature or involved in money-making is to be prohibited, such as thinking that if you pay a donation of “x” amount of dollars, you can buy your loved one into heaven.
- ▶ We are cautioned that it is impossible to describe this “purgation/cleansing” in temporal language. In other words, there is no fixed duration. It is neither long nor short in terms of actual time. Purgatory depends on how willing or resistant the person is in the encounter with God.
- ▶ The Church today embraces the best of both the East and the West as it emphasizes God’s mercy and the reality that purgatory is a means of maturation and growth rather than a means of paying a debt.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions. This dialogue can take place in the larger group.

- ▶ How do you feel about purgatory? Get out of your head and into your heart.
- ▶ What does it have to do with your relationship with God?
- ▶ Is it possible that life here on earth can be like a purgatory—that is, does this life offer the opportunity for us to be purified and grow in holiness?

Heaven

Refer to articles 1023-1029.

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The Church teaches that heaven is a state of supreme and absolute happiness. Those who die in a state of grace and who need no further purification go directly to God and join Jesus, Mary, and the saints and angels. As a body, we call such saints the communion of saints. The saints in heaven are considered the Church in heaven. Once in heaven, they intercede for the Church on earth and enjoy perfect communion with the Trinity (#209, Compendium: CCC, USCCB).

Biblical Understandings and Underpinnings

- ▶ In the language of biblical cosmology, heaven refers to the sky that hovers over the earth. In religious language, heaven refers to the dwelling place of God. In the Old Testament, the “heavens” reminded the ancients that God is almighty and sovereign over the world.
- ▶ The New Testament understands heaven as a state of eternal union with God where the just will be rewarded for their lives. Jesus came from heaven and

returned to heaven where he reigns as the eternal High Priest. Heaven is referred to as the Kingdom of God and the eternal wedding feast. Paul tells us that Christians are citizens of heaven.

- ▶ We experience heaven on earth when we live according to the gospel. Heaven is understood as eternal life with Christ. Heaven reflects a state of being, a quality of life, not a specific location.
- ▶ We are to avoid arbitrary imaginative representations of heaven since “neither Scripture nor theology provides sufficient light for a proper picture of life after death” (Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology by Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). Thus, heaven is understood as complete union with Jesus. It is primarily a New Testament belief. The veil will be removed to see God’s glory in person. We will live in complete harmony with him. We become like God. No trace of selfishness remains. We are fully open to others. That is why the Church teaches that martyrs went straight to heaven.
- ▶ Heaven is not considered a place; it is considered a relationship. Heaven is the state of being in which God continues to reveal himself to all of creation. Heaven is the state in which, we, God’s children fully accept God’s love and transformation of our lives.
- ▶ Heaven is a personal relationship with God. When we die, we will one day be reunited with our bodies in glory. We are in heaven to the degree we live our life in relationship to Christ.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions first with one other person then share insights in the wider group. Catechist shares an experience from his or her life. Refer to appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, can you relate to the statement, “Heaven is about relationship”?
- ▶ Think of your most joyful, happy relationship—in what way does the understanding that heaven is about relationship have any meaning for your life?
- ▶ How is your happiest relationship like the union you experience and share with God?

Judgment

Refer to articles 1021-1040.

- ▶ Judgment involves the past, present, and future.
- ▶ The Bible understands judgment as the act by which God overcomes evil once and for all. Judgment occurs in direct relation to our acceptance or rejection of Jesus.

Two types of judgment: general and particular

- ▶ General: at the end of the world Jesus will judge everyone as the last act of human history.
- ▶ Particular judgment: acknowledges that we are a unique creation of God's and therefore are subject to God's judgment as individuals.
- ▶ Judgment expresses the hope that we can look back on our lives at the end and discover meaning and purpose. Judgment is concerned with what we have made of our lives, the way we have grown in our potential as a fully alive human being who lived for others and how we cooperated (or not) with God's grace to achieve our full human potential?
- ▶ Judgment is not just a future reality but it is also a present reality. Judgment asks: "How have we grown in our relationship with God? Have we entered fully into the relationship God invites us to share with him?"
- ▶ Jesus lived up to his full human potential. That is...
 - Jesus loved with his entire being,
 - Jesus lived for others,
 - Jesus laid down his life for others,
 - Jesus lived in complete harmony with his Father.
- ▶ We are to strive similarly to achieve our full human potential which ultimately challenges us to ask...
 - How have we loved?
 - How have we lived for others?
 - How have we lived in relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ Consider your lives.
- ▶ How have you grown in your relationship with Christ?
- ▶ What is different in this relationship than even six months ago?
- ▶ How would you answer the above questions: How have you loved; how have you lived for others; how have you lived in relationship with God through Christ thus far in your life?



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question. Share in dyads.

- ▶ Name a time in your life or an experience in your life where you have loved well?
- ▶ Name an area in your life where love needs to grow? (share in dyads)

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenge us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world.

Catechist invites participants to share the following question in the larger group.

- ▶ In what way does this teaching on heaven, hell, purgatory, and judgment challenge you and the Christian community?

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and makes arrangements for group participation. In light of all that was shared, what is taking place in the parish this week that invites participation of the participants? For example, “This week our parish is responsible for cooking the meal on Wednesday night for our city’s homeless shelter. We are going to meet at daily bread to serve the meal and then we will reflect on our experience after we have cleaned up.”

Journal

Participants commit to a specific action, change of behavior or attitude as a result of participation in today’s liturgy. Perhaps persons commit to a specific Spiritual and Corporal Work of Mercy in response to God’s call.



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions, Doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”), a minor rite—a minor exorcism, RCIA # 90-97.

Option 2: Intercessions, Doxology, One or more ritual prayers from the Order of Christian Funerals.

Option 3: Use the prayer provided below.

Psalm 11 (NIV)

In the LORD I take refuge.
How then can you say to me:
“Flee like a bird to your mountain.
For look, the wicked bend their bows;
they set their arrows against the strings
to shoot from the shadows
at the upright in heart.
When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”
The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD is on his heavenly throne.
He observes everyone on earth;
his eyes examine them.
The LORD examines the righteous,
but the wicked, those who love violence,
he hates with a passion.
On the wicked he will rain
fiery coals and burning sulfur;
a scorching wind will be their lot.
For the LORD is righteous,
he loves justice;
the upright will see his face.

Appendix

#1: For eleven years, our family has suffered with my oldest son who is afflicted with schizophrenia. In the early years, I demanded that God act. I begged, cajoled, and tried to shame God into activity. “You promised, after all, that anyone who asks for bread would not be given a stone. But you have given us a stone and have turned a deaf ear.”

Over time, I came to a very slow acceptance of my son’s illness, having little hope of God’s intervention. My mission was to find the gift in the midst of the hell. I started to at least try and pray with a grateful heart. Over the years, true acceptance slowly came. When I could finally say, “Your will, not mine,” I was finally able to let go. I had matured to an extent that I had to trust that God loves my child as much as I do and wants nothing but good for him just as I do.

If he were not to get any better than he was at that moment, then his eternity must be joy beyond imagining. I came to see his suffering as Mother Theresa understood the suffering of Calcutta—redemptive suffering for all the sins of the world. I began to see it as ongoing participation in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for the redemption of the world.

Before my son became ill, he was getting a degree in social work so he could spend his life working with the poor. The sad irony is that his illness rendered him one of the poor he wanted to serve! This disease has been a personal purgatory for me. So often, God seemed absent; so often, I nearly fell into despair. Yet, in spite of those moments of despair, God took me by the hand and invited me to believe what I have learned to be true; God’s plan for our lives is far better than anything I could conceive.

#2. I am very blessed to have an amazing committed friendship. This friend loves me unconditionally. She reminds me of the love God has for me. She cares for me no matter how ugly I can be. I am free to be the person I am, warts and all—and still she is there for me. No matter what happens in my life, she drops everything to be by my side. Her friendship is an image of God in my life.

#3. The western versus eastern tradition is traced back to the Church’s earliest origin. When Christianity spread, two centers of leadership emerged, one in the East and another in the West. These centers provided leadership for their geographical area and were centers of unity for those areas. The churches in the East were headquartered in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. In the East, the bishops were called metropolitans, archbishops, or patriarchs. Rome was the only center of leadership in the West and was the unifying center of Italy and the West.

As the Church developed, Rome became increasingly preeminent. Rome was eventually considered the center of Christianity, and the teaching that came from Rome was considered the test of orthodoxy. However, for the first four centuries, the Eastern Church deferred very little to the Western Church.

It was not until the fifth century that the strong leadership of the papacy as we know it took shape. Rome was seen as the logical center of Christian leadership. The Roman empire's tradition of law, tradition, stability, justice, and discipline all worked toward providing the backdrop and the structure for the Church of Rome to develop into a center of unity for all of Christianity. The Church of the West must never forget that the Christian Church was born in the East and that its life during the early centuries was centered in the East. We derive our basic theology, monasticism, and liturgies as well as the great doctors and fathers of the Church from our eastern heritage. The eastern heritage continues today in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox traditions.

Handout

Biblical Context of Hell

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